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ABSTRACT

This book is the result of a 2-year study of women who were disadvantaged as girls but who achieved highly in academics. The participants, all of whom had advanced degrees or had completed two years of graduate school, had been raised in low-income homes, were first-generation college students, and had faced stress as children. Most of these women were Caucasian, but 4 of the 21 considered themselves part of an ethnic minority. They ranged in age from 24 to 54. Information about the 21 participants was collected through individual in-depth interviews, questionnaires, and school records. The interviews took place in the San Francisco (California) Bay area, although most of the women had grown up in different parts of the country. Elements that contributed to the resilience of these women were the focus of the study. It appears that these women achieved academically because they adapted and assimilated to the majority culture. They hid who they were because they believed that their backgrounds reflected on them negatively. Their circumstances at home led them to seek out reinforcement in other places, and they did this by being good girls and by excelling in school. Elementary school was easy for them. High school was less easy, but because they believed that they were smart and special, they did not give up on the idea that they had something to offer. Their motivation was always enhanced because they were drawn to fields in which they could use their intellectual abilities. These women had ideas about how to change the schools. They wanted teachers and mentors who treat them as future colleagues and who valued what they bring to their educational experience. They wanted to be evaluated accurately, according to their own strengths. They wanted the schools to get to know their parents and family situations in a way that does not embarrass or stigmatize them. Finally, they wanted more connection with the broader community. The following chapters are included: (1) "Introduction"; (2) "Description of the Participants"; (3) "Personalities of Resilient Women"; (4) "Relationships with Disadvantage"; (5) "Teachers"; (6) "Mentors"; (7) "Positive Aspects of Schooling"; (8) "Negative Aspects of Schooling"; (9) "Achievement and Development Patterns"; (10) "Family and Community Influences"; (11) "Why Do Some Women Succeed?"; and (12) "Transforming Education." Four appendixes discuss participant demographics and data collection methods and present research tables and the feedback questionnaire with participant comments. (Contains 5 tables and 88 references.) (SLD)